



Schools, Teachers & Students

Tips in responding to young people with complex mental health needs

The young person may become very stressed or anxious about people they have a relationship with leaving. They may appear clingy or very needy in relationships, and experience intense relationships with others.

Tip: Recognise that the person is vulnerable and insecure, and think of ways to help them feel safe even when relationships and the environment are changing. Accept that the person will react with greater fear or anxiety in the face of change and try to soothe and assist them to manage these feelings.

The young person may display a pattern of emotionally intense relationships with others. These may include rapidly shifting between extremes in emotion and seeing others as “all good” or “all bad”.

Tip: Recognise the neediness for attachment, but also the fear of relationships. Try to be as consistent as possible despite the person's difficulties relating to you and others in a consistent way.

The young person may find it difficult to identify who they are or where they fit in the world. They may appear to “try on” different identities, their identity may change frequently to reflect the people around them, or they may express not knowing who they are.

Tip: Help the person understand themselves by discussing their preferences, likes and dislikes. Allow them time to experience events then ask them to recall their experience. The building blocks of the self are formed through a succession of reflecting on experiences and preferences, and feeling accepted by others.

The young person may impulsively engage in multiple risky activities which may be damaging or make the young person feel guilt, anger, sadness or shame, such as drug and alcohol use, risky sexual behaviours, binge eating, or dangerous driving.

Tip: Note the context in which impulsive or risky behaviours occur, and work on prevention so that the person is less likely to find themselves in places or with people that make it harder for them to remain calm.

The young person may express a wish to hurt themselves or end their life, take steps towards ending their life, or may intentionally hurt themselves with behaviours such as cutting, scratching, burning, or hitting.

Tip: Respond with compassion. Try to understand the person's feelings and thoughts but promote safety as a first priority. Remind the person that these feelings will pass, that there are always solutions and hopefulness and reasons for living. Try to work with the person to find the reasons for living and reinforce what is valued. Reinforce basic needs for food, rest and connection with others.

The young person may experience sudden and intense changes in their emotions such as suddenly feeling very annoyed or very depressed, with the feeling usually lasting a few hours, and often triggered by an interaction with someone such as a friend, parent etc.

Tip: Provide a calm, non-reactive environment as much as possible. When emotions flare up, do not fuel them but listen and respond in as calm a way as possible. The person may invite you to join them in their emotional feelings, however it can be helpful to model being 'contagious with calm'.





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The young person may describe feeling lonely and isolated from others or become bored easily.

Tip: Be compassionate that this mental illness causes significant suffering. Try to provide a good enough relationship so that the person feels a connection with you that provides hope. Recognise the importance of social integration with peers and the community as much as possible and promote safety when feelings become overwhelming.

The young person may display sudden and intense anger, and experiences significant difficulty controlling their anger. This might include yelling, severe bitterness or sarcasm, or physical outbursts.

Tip: People who are very emotionally activated may find it hard to listen to reason or explain their feelings. Try to ride out the wave of their distress, and when more settled it may be possible to talk to them about their experience. Try not to become reactive to their anger, provide as safe environment as possible to contain their feelings, but acknowledge that for the person these feelings are very real for them at the time. Show compassion to their distress where possible.

When stressed, the young person may appear very suspicious of others, or may appear to “zone out” and not hear what is said to them, have trouble concentrating on a task, or may report feeling numb or that their experiences are “unreal” or dream-like.

Tip: Dissociation when it becomes habitual can prevent the person from learning from experience. If you notice a young person daydreaming or drifting off, provide ways to keep them present by giving them an activity to do, ask them a question, or give them eye contact or attention. If a young person becomes very suspicious, try to build trust and show them compassion.

The young person may be very critical of themselves, see themselves as bad or worthless, and engage in frequent negative self-talk. They may also appear to give up easily on tasks, procrastinate, appear very anxious about making mistakes or be reluctant to try new things due to a fear of failure.

Tip: Healing these feelings can take time and compassion, and where possible provide experiences that give the person a sense of accomplishment, while recognising that they might find such positive feelings unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

